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ABSTRACT

The author is presently engaged in an action research experiment in two school districts in the Southeastern United States that is focusing on the role of two variables in determining the effectiveness of community advisory councils. The two variables are the objectives the advisory councils are supposed to achieve and the factors, some detrimental and some beneficial, that can have significant impact on the successful functioning of these groups. A year remains in the experiment so only a brief progress report can be given at present. The final accounting will depend on the views of four discrete groups: the districts' educators; members of the advisory council; representative parents, citizens, and members of the community-at-large; and the consultant serving the two districts. Overall, the project is not so much concerned with whether advisory councils are effective as with the factors and conditions that must prevail to ensure that they have a reasonable chance to become effective. (Author/IRT)

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ARE CITIZEN/PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS EFFECTIVE?

A Report of An Action Research Experiment in Progress

by

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A Paper for Presentation at the

Annual Meeting of the

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Introduction

Citizen involvement in public schooling has taken different forms during the history of American public education, manifesting itself primarily however through the devices of the elected school board and approval of an annual school budget (Hatton, 1979). It was not until the sixties, however, that this principle took on a renewed and more insistent dimension. The reform movement of the 1960's along with the accountability demands of the 1970's brought an increased emphasis for meaningful and real (rather than superficial and token) involvement of the public in the control and governance of their schools. While a great deal of the attention and energy of the reform movement during the sixties tended to focus on decentralization as the means to accomplishing this end (Selden, 1979), other strategies were also propounded (Kaplan, 1976; 1972). These included the assignment of parents, especially from poor families, as classroom aides or papaprofessionals and the use of community persons as school ombudsmen. However, by and far the greatest investment in terms of effort and practice has taken the form of the advisory council. Indeed, often the two are used almost interchangeably such that (a) if parent or community involvement is cited, then the method is almost always

presumed to be, without question, the advisory council; or (b) if advisory councils exist, this implies the presence of parent or community involvement. We are beginning to learn, especially in the latter case, that the claim all too often is a hollow one.

Perhaps, greatest attention to advisory councils has been occasioned by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's Title I with its mandatory requirement for a parent advisory council (PAC) at each participating Title I school. Increasingly since that time many other federal programs (ESAA, Head Start, Title IV, ESEA, PL 94-192) and many state programs (California, South Carolina, Florida, Minnesota, Massachusetts) have mandated the formation of advisory councils as an essential requirement for their respective program's operation (Institute for Responsive Education, 1978). In fact, there are some intimations that advisory councils are becoming so numerous and ubiquitous that in some instances they are tending to interfere with one another's efficiency.

Suffice it to say, that at this point in time, advisory councils appear to be the most popular vehicle for attaining increased involvement and participation of parents/citizens/community in public school affairs. This movement has over the last few years begun to receive its proper critical assessment (Davies, Clasby and Powers, 1977; Bridge, 1976; Kaplan, 1976; Weiner, 1978; Mercurio, 1979). While it has been noted several years ago that community involvement can be exercised in relatively high to low degrees of genuine participation (Arnstein, 1971), most of the current studies

and evaluations, especially with respect to ESEA, Title I PACs, have found advisory councils falling far short of their potential or promise (Hightower, 1978; Kaplan and Forgione, 1978). Indeed the title of this symposium, "Community/Parent Involvement--Myth or Reality," implies that this concept may exist in name only.

The question raised in this paper, and expressed in its title, is, "Are advisory councils effective?" Based on research findings in the literature and on his own experience with this phenomenon (Kaplan, 1967), the author's response is a qualified "yes." The "yes" depends largely on two variables. First, what is it that advisory councils are supposed to accomplish? A number of objectives have been suggested for them, including, but not limited to these:

- -increased pupil achievement
- -greater public confidence in the schools
- -a parental/citizen voice in decision-making
- -a heightened responsiveness to diverse public viewpoints
- -a higher frequency of adult participation in school-community activities
- -greater support of the schools through bond issues, etc.
- -decreased criticism of the schools
- -community-supported changes and innovations in school programs and policies

Second, there are a number of factors, some detrimental and others beneficial, that can have significant impact on the successful functioning of these groups (Davies, Clasby and Powers, 1977; Kaplan, 1973). Inhibitors include ignorance of essential facts, confusion over role and lack of orientation and training. Facilitators include strong administrative support, open communication channels and the provision for on-going technical assitance (Mercurio, 1979; Grant, 1979; Kaplan and Forgione, 1978).

An Action Research Approach

The author is presently engaged in an action research experiment in two school districts in the Southeastern United States in which the two variables mentioned above will be assessed to determine the extent of success (effectiveness) or lack of it when certain conditions prevail and when others (local circumstances which cannot realistically be controlled) are duly observed and noted. Among the latter are such factors as Board-Superintendent relationships and changes in key personnel. Certain facilitating conditions have been specified and accepted by the two participating school districts in their sponsorship of local citizen advisory councils. These include the following:

1. Membership. Individuals serving on such councils must represent, en toto, both school and non-school constituencies. It is important for representatives of the Board of Education, the central administration, school principals and instructional staff to be included. Equally important, diverse and multiple viewpoints from across the community sprectrum must be represented via various socio-economic, ethnic, age or educational levels, geographical location, and/or residential tenure in the district if these are important segments within the community. Further, a procedure must be developed whereby the Council members are not "hand-picked" by school administrators. Moreover, the majority of Council members must not consist of school employees or their relatives.

2. Clarity of Role. Not only should proposed candidates for membership on the advisory council be made familiar with their prospective role on the Council, and the latter's function and purpose, Board of Education and school officials require a similar set of understandings. Responsibilities and constraints must be specified in writing at the onset and be repeated frequently during the Council's lifetime.

3. Clarification Concerning Time and Commitment. Early on, prospective members need to be apprized of the necessary commitments they will have to make in terms of time, energy, and personal dedication.

4. In-service Education. Council members who are not educators cannot be expected to possess the same knowledge base concerning educational matters as school officials have. This means that the orientation provided for these members must be carefully designed; furthermore, there should be recognition of the need for continuing education about local schools and school matters. This can easily be slighted and, by the same token, it can easily be overdone. Nevertheless, most Council members, including those already employed by the schools, can gain much from a carefully designed schedule of activities (visits to schools, media and in-service presentations, etc.) to provide them with an up-to-date picture of the district's facilities, programs and pupils.

5. The Council as a Cooperative. Council members, when being organized, must be given sufficient opportunity to work together, to know one another, and to function effectively both formally and informally. This requires opportunities for members, not only to learn something about each other as individuals with varying concerns and views, but also to learn something minimally about group dynamics, and group interactions, relationships and procedures that can have a major impact on operation and efficiency of such groups.

6. The Continuing Role of School Officials. Once an Advisory Council has been organized and set into motion, there still remains a continuing need for the Council to receive vital information and support from school officials throughout the remainder of its lifetime. School support or participation by educators cannot be permitted to diminish in tone or quality.

7. Communications. Members who serve on a Council must be able to share important information about their deliberations and concerning matters involving choices and decisions with their colleagues, friends or neighbors. Similarly, they must be given an opportunity, and frequently be encouraged, to obtain reactions (feedback) from others, prior to Council action on major decisions.

8. Council Operation. The procedures, meetings, policies, agendas, specific activities, and the like, of the Council must be developed and agreed on as much as possible by the Council itself. The activities, meetings, decisions, etc. of the Council must be given extensive publicity prior to and after their occurence. Other community members (non-Council members) must also be given ample and genuine opportunity to participate and to serve on important sub-committees and the like. The Council should strive to avoid becoming either a "shadow" or mini-school board on the one hand, or an elitist/ closed group on the other.

These eight provisions were stipulated as basic principles or guidelines for the "successful" organization and operation of a local Parent/Citizen Advisory Council.

The Settings

District-wide citizen advisory councils were established during 1978, with the above guidelines and understandings in effect, in two public school systems in the Southeastern United States. Each district was in the process of launching a new comprehensive planning project utilizing a small grant from its respective State Department of Education. Two to two-and-a-half years was the time allocated for the planning projects' duration. The two districts are denoted as District L and District O and each is briefly described below. District L serves 12,000 students in Grades K-12 in 16 elementary and four secondary schools. An elected school board appoints the Superintendent of Schools. The latter is presently in his second year in this position, having served previously in the district as a school principal. His contract has just been renewed for a three-year period.

The district's population is nearly 60,000 and is increasing steadily. Its setting is changing from rural

to suburban. Formerly its major industry was agriculture but is rapidly changing to a light industrial, agri-business and recreational economy. The bulk of the population is middle-class although there is a distinct low-economic section. The district's population growth is a result of an influx of newcomers from a large metropolitan center about seventy miles away as well as from other states along the Eastern seaboard. There is a community college, a post-secondary vocational-technical school and a small private college within the district's boundaries and a highly respected State University is located about forty miles away.

Most of the influential leaders in the community, as well as the area's only local newspaper, are regarded as exhibiting a distinctly conservative bent. People in this school district tend to see their school system as a "good" one and as one that's been improving over the last five to ten years. Nevertheless, there appears to be a genuine desire to have the schools achieve even higher standards and accomplishments.

The district officials tend to perceive their district's prime educational problems as these:

1. To establish, maintain and/or improve a program that is already regarded as one of "good quality;"

2. To successfully accommodate its growing pains so that necessary changes are accomplished fast enough but not so quickly that major errors are made; and

3. To maintain a competitive position with neighboring school districts, by whom until very recently it was regarded as having lesser standing.

Overall, then, District L seeks to modernize its programs, operations and facilities as rapidly as possible, keeping abreast of public expectation and varied student needs. Changes, innovations, and expansions are regarded as necessary and imminent but exactly which ones, where, when and how are all matters of current concern to the school district's Board of Education and its administrators.

District O serves 2,500 pupils in eight schools. An elected school board of five members appoints the Superintendent of Schools. The present superintendent has served in the district for two and a half years. Previously he served as superintendent of schools in a nearby district. The former superintendent retired suddenly, a few years ago, earlier than he had planned to because of pressures from the community to do something about the poor physical conditions of the schools.

The district's primary economic base depends on agriculture and forestry. Most of its citizens are middle-low or low socio-economic in terms of earnings; two-thirds of the population live at or below the poverty level (1970 census) and the average number of school years completed per citizen is nine. The overall population is 50% white and 50% black; however, the public school population is about 75% black. Population in the area has been steadily

decreasing over recent years although this downward trend has started to stabilize.

Most of the people in the district tend to hold the opinion that although there are schools (some of them in districts not too far away) which are "worse off," the local schools' programs, services and facilities still leave a great deal to be desired. There is considerable and widespread concern over the insufficient breadth of program offerings at the high school level, of poor showings of students academically at the elementary levels, and over the poor conditions and age typical of most of the physical units housing the district's pupils. A bond issue to rectify this latter situation, proposing a new comprehensive vocational high school and consolidation of other smaller units, was resoundly defeated about three years ago. Since that time, little has happened to change the picture; most school officials and the Board of Education recognize the school system's inadequacies; most parents sense that the system, while trying to do its best within its available resources, may not be doing enough to provide their children with sufficient learning opportunities and experiences; and other taxpayers in the district, both influential and numerous, are not convinced that the situation is a serious one, or that anything in the way of increased resources or finances need to be provided. In fact, the latter, a powerful and well-positioned group, have through their strong opposition to the bond issue, served notice that the district's

officials can do most anything they choose as long as it doesn't result in an increase in school taxes.

(A note should be added here concerning racial integration in these two districts. Both were integrated about seven years ago, without particular incident. District L, with approximately 10% of its school population black had no major difficulty consolidating and integrating its schools and, at this time, apparently has no pressing or residual problems related to this event. District O, on the other hand, presently has a 75% black student enrollment. When the schools were integrated seven years ago, a separate white academy was established. It still operates, for grades 1-12; many of the white parents in this district send their children to this private school which is centrally located in the district in a retired public school facility. There is little communication between the parents or the school officials of this school and those associated with the public schools.)

The Procedures

In each case, with District L and with District O, a deputy-type school official was assigned to serve as project coordinator. In this capacity, that individual could arrange to obtain the services of a consultant-specialist in the areas of planning and the utilization of community groups. Both districts, independently, employed on a retainer basis the services of this paper's author to provide technical assistance as their respective districts attempted to develop,

design, test and implement local plans for system-wide changes with respect to their current educational provisions. In conferring with this consultant and prior to making a commitment to employ his services, each coordinator was unreservedly clear and convinced that, if any kind of significant change or shift was to be effected, the community-at-large had to become more immediately involved in related discussions, planning and proposals. Similarly, both coordinators professed a lack of sophistication/and confidence with respect to successful methods for involving citizens and community representatives in such deliberations.

In each district, the local Board of Education and the superintendent of schools were requested to endorse the organization of a district-wide advisory council along the lines suggested in the foregoing list of principles Each coordinator was requested, also, to adopt these principles insofar as the local situation permitted; both agreed to do so without hesitation.

A further understanding requested by this consultant was that district officials and advisory council members recognize the role of the consultant as a resource person and facilitator, and that responsibility for all decisions, activities, policies, commitments, and the like, be directly attributed to the district or the Council (rather than to the consultant); each was asked to behave on the basis that they believed in the "reality" of the Council and to be prepared to accept either praise or criticism, or both, for what might ensue.

During the course of the respective two projects, the consultant has served as a resource person, providing technical assistance through frequent on-site meetings with local staff and the councils, through provision of specially prepared written materials and by telephone. This progress report and subsequent evaluation rely on the writer's presence in the two districts as a participant-observer and process-facilitator.

Progress to Date

It is now one year since the experiment in each district was initiated. One more year remains for the respective planning projects to continue under available supporting funds.

For a number of reasons (which will be discussed at the conclusion of the experiment) the two districts have moved in different directions, at different rates, and with different results.

Since April 1979 is the approximate mid-point in the experimental period, a brief summary of progress is offered at this juncture. An assessment concerning degree of success, and the impact of the foregoing guiding principles for the organization and operation of a citizen/community advisory council, must in all fairness await the experiment's conclusion. (The final analysis will also attempt to delineate other influential and critical factors affecting the role and impact of these two advisory councils within their respective school districts.)

District L has elected to move cautiously. Instead of creating a district-wide advisory council for its project as it began planning for the latter, it chose to encourage, on a voluntary but Board of Education approved basis, the formation of individual school "partnership councils," with the school principal serving as the primary agent for a "go/no go" decision. All but two or three of the district's twenty schools organized local councils.

About two months ago, a district-wide Council was established; each school was requested to nominate a candidate, selecting this individual from its own school council if one existed. The district-wide Council is broad, extensive and cross-representative of the many elements in the area. It has held one meeting, with both the Superintendent of Schools and a Board of Education member present (both will serve on the Council). The early feedback is that the Council is enthusiastic and receptive concerning its role and, further, that it is anxious to proceed with a number of activities proposed for it by the project coordinator. District L's coordinator has played a major part in the formation and planning of the Council, and particularly its timing, and he serves as its executive secretary. The Council is now undertaking a needs assessment of the district's programs; it will soon rework the district's philosophy for its schools; and it plans a series of school visits within the district for its members as an opportunity for in-service.

District O has had an Advisory Council (a "Steering Committee") in operation for about ten months. It meets about once a month. To date, the Council has sponsored four activities; (1) preparation of the district's first statement of educational philosophy; (2) preparation of a set of educational goals for the district; (3) a tour of district facilities by a subcommittee; and (4) a three-phase assessment of district needs and priorities. The Council has also participated in two short planning workshops at the start of its operation. Attendance at meetings has remained at a relatively high level. The Council has worked closely with the district's administration and school board. At times, it has required special assistance and prodding from the project coordinator. The project's original coordinator resigned to accept another position over the preceding summer and was replaced with an individual new to the district; some difference in style of operation, as well as with familiarity concerning the local scene, is evident. Presently, the Council has assigned two subcommittees to study (a) critical curriculum/instructional changes and (b) district facilities--options and consequences. At the current time, there is some concern expressed by some Council members that they are not moving fast enough and that too much time may have been expended on matters of secondary importance. The Superintendent of Schools has also implied, on occasion, a concern that the Council remember its proper role as an advisory group rather than one which is superordinate to the district's Board of Education.

The Final Assessment

Are these Advisory Councils effective, particularly in light of the principles and guidelines affecting their formation and early operations? The final answer must await another year when the respective projects are concluded. However, a final accounting will depend on the consensus of opinion from four discrete sources:

1. The district's educators;
2. Members of the Advisory Council;
3. Representative members of parents, citizens, and the community-at-large; and
4. The consultant serving the two districts.

In the case of the district officials, success or effectiveness will be based on the extent of change it was possible to initiate (with either community support or a lack of negative criticism from the community), plus the degree of community input the Council was able to generate.

In the case of the members of the Advisory Council, itself, effectiveness will be based on the perceived impact its recommendations may have had on the Board of Education and the school district's administrators, and how many of these recommendations were adopted either in fact or in principle.

In the case of other community members, success will be based on their perception of the Council's role and function, and its impact in bringing about important changes in school operations, programs or policies, particularly those directly affecting student performance and behavior.

In the fourth case, the assessment will be based on a combination of the foregoing three reactions, plus the following considerations:

- -Was the Advisory Council truly representative of a variety of community views and opinions--or did it, in effect, become a puppet of the school administration?
- -Did the Advisory Council sponsor or engage in meaningful, significant activities which would not otherwise have taken place?
- -Did the School Board and/or the school administrators develop increased awareness and sensitivity to new issues and to various dimension of these issues about which they would otherwise probably have remained ignorant?
- -Did the actions, recommendations or findings of the Council in any way (directly or indirectly) affect what or how the schools provided for their students in terms of services, programs or instruction?

In the final assessment, the evaluator will also note the extent to which the principles and understandings governing the Councils' formation and operations were observed and honored in practice. Further, the likely impact of these on the Council's effectiveness will also be analyzed.

Overall, however, the basic question undergirding this inquiry, is not whether advisory councils are effective so much as it is this one: <u>what factors and conditions must prevail to insure that advisory councils have a reasonable chance to become effective?</u> An increasing number of reports are questioning the efficacy and real contribution of citizen/community advisory councils. The time is now propitious, it appears, for researchers to direct their attention to this latter question, for the potential findings

can offer valuable and constructive guidance to those concerned with the impact of this phenomenon on public education.

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